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### Deposited in DRO:

01 June 2011

### Version of attached file:

Published Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Avakian, S. and Clark, T. and Roberts, J. (2010) 'Examining the relationship between trust and culture in the consultant-client relationship.', in Organizational trust : a cultural perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 129-155. Cambridge companions to management.

### Further information on publisher's website:

[http://www.cambridge.org/gb/knowledge/isbn/item2708625/?site\\_locale=en\\_GB](http://www.cambridge.org/gb/knowledge/isbn/item2708625/?site_locale=en_GB)

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# 5 *Examining the relationship between trust and culture in the consultant–client relationship*

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## Summary

This chapter examines the dimensions of inter-organizational and interpersonal trust as they are manifested in the consultant–client interaction, viewed within the ‘cultural spheres’ framework (Schneider and Barsoux, 2003). The chapter argues that the alignment or misalignment of culture(s) helps foster or hinder the presence of trust in the consultant–client relationship. We support our argument by demonstrating how culture becomes an important informative resource from which consultants and clients manage their expectations and risk taking. In inter-organizational contexts, trust is developed through artifacts and formal procedures that are shared by both parties. In interpersonal contexts, trust is developed through the mutual sharing of cultural values, as manifested in the interpersonal qualities of integrity and benevolence. Cultural values are not necessarily part of the parent consulting firm but can be unique to the people working in partnership on a project. Examples of behavioural cultural values include forms of communication, constructive criticism, displays of ability, benevolence and integrity and an unhesitating voicing of opinions that can lead to a realignment of attitudes, feelings, motives, and objectives.

## Introduction

In a service relationship where business advice is consumed over the course of a series of interactions, the presence of ambiguity creates uncertainty (Clark, 1995). Management consulting is an example of a complex service activity whose success is dependent on the nature of the interaction between the actors (Clark, 1995; Fincham, 1999; Lowendahl, 2005; Nachum, 1999). The organizational actors involved are placed in a challenging position without, in many cases, having adequate prior knowledge on which to establish their mutual expectations and interests. Consultants undertake the risk of

designing a service that will meet the client's interests without full knowledge of the client's requirements and expectations. Clients undertake the risk of entering into a business contract without full knowledge of whether the consultants will meet their full expectations/needs.

The parties' interdependence is a compelling social force: both consultant and client are in need of common grounds of interest and mutual alignment (Sturdy, 1997). Clients are in need of the consultants' services for responding to an array of organizational and institutional needs, and consultants are in need of the client's contract for maintaining their own business presence in the market (Sturdy, 1997). This impasse creates mutual vulnerability and fear of loss. As such, the corporate and personal dynamics that emerge during client–consultant interactions are highly instrumental to how satisfaction or dissatisfaction is produced (Roberts, 2003). Specifically, the consultants' production of knowledge and its presentation to the client is thought to take place through staged interactions involving information gathering and analysis (Czerniawska, 1999). Management methods and tools are employed in order to provide problem-solving frameworks that are believed to correspond to the client's needs. The consultant's success or failure to legitimize the value of their service is, therefore, dependent on their management of the client's expectations and uncertainty, as well as on the consultant's instrumentality in positioning/ adjusting their service to meet the clients' perceived needs (Czerniawska, 2002). For their part, clients need to be aware how their expectations of consultants responding to a business problem might be different from how the consultants think, design and seek to deliver their service.

Clearly, the consultant–client relationship is one in which trust is highly significant as a concept for helping us understand the mechanisms by which these risks and interdependencies are managed (Roberts, 2003; Das and Teng, 1998; Sheppard and Sherman, 1998). However, the notion of trust has been only partially discussed in the management consulting literature. Indeed, although the consultant–client relationship has been broadly discussed in light of the transfer of information and knowledge, little is known about the nature of the partnership (Sturdy, 1997).

The stages by which consultants detect and respond to the client's needs take place in a fluid social context where the qualities of credibility and value are intertwined with the meeting of expectations (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). The inter-organizational and interpersonal relationships between consultant and client involve a host of complex social, political and economic dynamics. Although these have generated much attention in the literature (Berglund and Werr, 2000), there is little understanding of the *social*

dimensions contributing to the management of inter-organizational and interpersonal partnerships (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1998; Bigley and Pearce, 1998).

This chapter aims to address this gap by exploring how representations of cultural ‘spheres’ (Schneider and Barsoux, 2003) or ‘tiles’ (Chao and Moon, 2005) shape the development of trust in the consultant–client relationship (see also Dietz, Gillespie and Chao, this volume). We examine the implications of these processes for the credibility and value of the consulting service that is produced and consumed. The chapter argues that the alignment/misalignment of cultural spheres has implications for how trust/distrust is generated and maintained in consultant–client relationships at the inter-organizational and/or interpersonal levels.

The next section provides an overview on how culture and trust are discussed in the management consulting literature. The chapter then moves on to the method used in our empirical study and an analysis of findings. It concludes by arguing that at the inter-organizational level trust is maintained through the sharing of similar corporate values and ideology, and at the interpersonal level trust is maintained through the specific interaction between actors and the exercise of personal attributes like integrity, benevolence and ability.

### **Cultural spheres between consultants and clients**

Even though consultant–client practises have been discussed in the context of knowledge attributes, the nature of the interaction is heavily dependent on the consulting and client firms’ *cultures*. The study of culture is an important tool for understanding the development of trust in the consultant–client relationship because each party’s perceived level of risk and interdependence is embedded to some extent in the different sets of cultural values and artifacts that each party brings to the relationship. Understanding the cultural dimensions that influence the design and delivery of business advice can help us understand the interactive framework from which both parties structure their expectations for each other.

In line with the treatment of the term ‘culture’ in this book – as being separated into different ‘cultural spheres’ or ‘tiles’ (Schneider and Barsoux, 2003; Chao and Moon, 2005) – we see consultants’ and clients’ multiple cultural spheres as representing sources of social identity and knowledge, from which the actors draw meaning in order to sustain and manage their mutual expectations. Parties’ cultural spheres can also provide an important locus of information and knowledge from which each is able to manage their

expectations of the other. In this sense, different cultural spheres provide a medium of information from which both parties are able to manage the mutually existing uncertainty.

We can delineate the 'multiple cultural memberships' that consultants encounter in themselves and in their dealings with their clients. 'Culture' in the consultant–client relationship is multifaceted. It is represented in forms of organizational structures, policies and procedures as well as in values and assumptions that are embedded and justified in the belief-system of organizational actors. For consultants, cultural spheres can be expressed in the corporate identity of their employer. Such a corporate identity might extend to being known for a specialized line of business services (e.g. strategy, change management, business methodology or client ideology), or with a particular sector (manufacturing, services, public sector). This identity may be seen as setting the consulting firm apart from similar consulting players. Consultants' corporate cultural sphere may extend to their modes of designing and delivering a service in client organizations: for example, culture may determine the extent to which consultants grow into an understanding of whether they should be the dominant party or delegate the decision making to the client. In sum, consultants are equipped with the ideology, guidelines and methodology of the parent consulting firm which provide the *lens* through which the clients' needs are interpreted. Their corporate cultural sphere can exert a very powerful influence on individual consultants' thinking, values and behaviours. Other potentially influential cultural spheres include the national culture of the consulting firm, and of the individual consultant; the 'professional' cultural sphere of the sector or specialism the parties work within, and even workplace subcultures.

Similarly, clients' cultural spheres may extend to their personal anticipations of how consultants should address a given business situation. Sectors may have particular values and norms: for example, the public sector's priorities and modes of operating may differ markedly from those found in commercial enterprises. Furthermore, a client's 'personal' cultural sphere might differ according to whether consultants are seen as a positive asset from a 'corporate' culture, or as an unnecessary cause of expenditure to be avoided. Equally, client workplaces may have idiosyncratic 'cultures'.

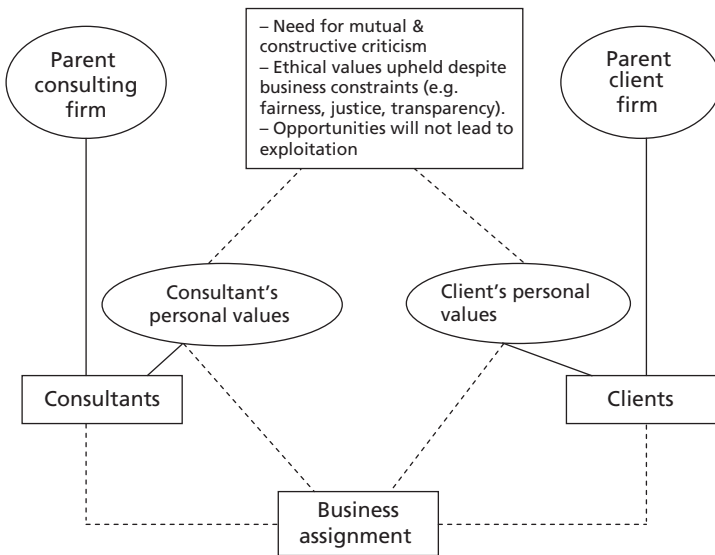
Trust can be fostered or hindered through the way in which cultural spheres and their limitations are managed between the two parties. Consultants need to be aware of how their service needs to be tailored to the assignment but also of more general, related demands of the client. The consultant's process of entering into the client's culture and creating legitimacy requires the competency to address a host of issues that concern: a) the

appreciation of the business problem and how it is interpreted by the client, b) the design of a consulting service that is able to address the problem while at the same time managing to generate the targeted revenues for the parent consulting firm, c) the ability to address the interpersonal issues between the organizational actors and the emergence of conflict during the delivery of the business assignment.

Another source of cues regarding the parties' trustworthiness is institutional frameworks (Zucker, 1986) which can become instrumental in reducing levels of corporate risk and allowing the establishment of a cooperative relationship (Doney and Cannon, 1997). Legal frameworks also help outline the scope of responsibilities enclosed in such a business transaction (Ring and Van de Ven, 1992; Williamson, 1985). However, the management consulting industry does not have a formal system of knowledge that is commonly shared across practises (Kieser, 1997). Although extant regulative frameworks can provide the institutional context in which the partnership can be manifested, the quality of the interpersonal relationship between actors is dependent on interpretive social mechanisms. As Glücker and Armbrüster (2003) argue, the presence of such bureaucratic frameworks is not enough to explain the continuing legitimacy of consulting firms in the market, because administrative structures cannot help explain the process of reducing social uncertainty in the interaction itself. Furthermore, Glücker and Armbrüster (2003: 270) argue that: 'personal experience that evolves from interaction between clients and consultants becomes most important in reducing uncertainty and controlling for opportunistic behaviour'. Trust and culture constitute such social mechanisms because their exploration reveals the micro-interpretive processes by which such interaction is produced, managed and maintained.

The implication of the above is that consultants and clients can find themselves in a kind of 'interpretive tension'. They try to reconcile a) the application of the corporate values as communicated by their employer firm with b) the client's expectations or 'ambiguous' requirements. Extant cultural values at a corporate level can influence how consultants think and deliver their assignment. Yet consultants often experience a sense of 'corporate rigidity' when they want to deviate from the instructions/culture of the parent firm. Such tension can have direct implications for the generation of trust in the consultant–client relationship. Figure 5.1 depicts these tensions.

Since each sphere 'may shape a person's thinking or conduct independently or simultaneously with another sphere' (Dietz *et al.*, this volume), understanding the alignment or misalignment of cultural spheres is about clarifying the meaning mechanisms by which the two parties communicate (Hatch,



**Figure 5.1** Levels of interaction in the consultant–client relationship

1993; Schein, 2004). Culture constitutes a powerful informative resource from which actors craft their understanding and expectation about the other party. Our argument is that trust is embedded in the alignment of cultural spheres that helps reduce the perceived uncertainty of the transaction.

### *Study of trust in the consulting literature*

Glücker and Arbrüster argue that trust is not dependent on the institutional structures through which consulting firms position their services in the market but rather, economic transactions are deeply embedded in types of social networks that help reduce the perceived degree of risk and uncertainty. Consultants are able to maintain their popularity and presence in the industry through the use of ‘networked reputation’ (Glücker and Arbrüster, 2003). This term encapsulates two dimensions: first, public reputation as contained in claims of regulative acceptability, compliance with professional bodies and marketing practises; and second, transactional personal experience, as embedded in the temporalities of the business assignment. Networked reputation can be used to understand the shared qualities of these dimensions. Instead of being viewed as separate practises, networked reputation indicates that public reputation is really exemplified through interpersonal interactions. The transactional personal experience between consultants and clients comes to be equally embedded in the firm’s reputation.

The personification of the firm's reputation by its actors creates a path of legitimacy that is missed when corporate reputation and experienced transaction are viewed separately. This means that consultants seek to make use of their firm's reputation in the interaction with clients in order to add credibility to the prospects of their service. Moreover, consulting partners seek to channel and utilize the success of an individual assignment to the overall firm's reputation (Maister, 1993, 1997). Thus, the use of 'networked reputation' argued by Glücker and Arbrüster is intended as a metaphor to exemplify a dualistic function in the context of organizational trust as it is demonstrated through forms of institutional legitimacy *and* personal social networks. In this context, Glücker and Arbrüster argue: 'networked reputation conveys a far more personal and reliable credibility, since word-of-mouth discloses "thick information" about potential transaction partners' (2003: 280).

Even though the work by Glücker and Arbrüster has helped widen our understanding of organizational trust in consultancy settings, the conclusion of their findings is mainly drawn from economic institutional trust which focuses on the macro-practises of management consulting firms. Moreover, their argument of networked reputation is based on the prominent role that informants play for potential clients. Informants represent third parties that provide testimonies to others and who can influence future clients out of their personal positive or negative experiences. Glücker and Arbrüster argue that a client's experience with a consultant becomes a source of information from which other clients come to shape their ideas about a particular consulting firm. However, in making this argument, Glücker and Arbrüster do not explain how this process takes place, but rather assume that the creation of positive testimonies becomes a powerful legitimacy force. Hence, risk and uncertainty are reduced as new clients base their decisions on the positive/negative experience from other clients to which they have access (i.e. a reputation effect from third parties).

Clearly, further research is needed to establish the nature of network practises between consultants and clients at a micro-level of analysis (Salaman, 2001). This is necessary to identify the more specific forms of trust building, not only by looking at how consultants personify their public reputation in the transactional experience with clients, but also how clients may react and influence how this process takes place. In this sense, we argue that there is a clear need to identify the establishment of personal and organizational trust from a discursive and practise perspective. We argue that by eliciting the forms of consultant–client interaction at a micro-level of analysis, and through the lens of culture, we will be able to reveal the role of cultural spheres through which trust is not only generated but also



maintained. By exploring trust through the parties' cultural lenses we can learn how the mechanisms of trust emerge in the relationship.

## Methodology

Taking into account the diversity of consulting firms, we approached consultants where the nature of their service required a personal interaction with the client, and where business knowledge was the main input into the final service. Such consulting firms provided services related to strategy, human resources, operations, knowledge management and general management advice. We excluded firms that specialized in IT services or similar technical consulting firms whose mode of service was nearly expressed through outsourcing and with a minimal involvement by the client. The types of consulting firms ranged from small firms (under 10 employees) to medium (50–100 employees) to large corporations (over 100 employees). The client interviews also range between public and private organizations.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty consultants and twenty clients in UK. The interviews ranged between sixty and ninety minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and a copy of the interview transcript was sent back to each interviewee for corrections, additions or modifications before agreement was given to its content and a finalized version produced. Strict confidentiality and anonymity was provided for the protection of the personal and strategic information disclosed and all names have been replaced. The difficulty of gaining access to consulting and client firms limited our ability to interview parties engaged in the same assignment. Consequently, the clients that consultants referred to are not the ones we have interviewed and vice versa.

Our questions concern three main themes that can be summarized as follows: 1) the nature of inter-organizational and interpersonal trust in the consultant–client relationship; 2) the context of inter-organizational and interpersonal culture and the different ways in which it is demonstrated; 3) different organizational and personal forms of culture and trust manifestation in the consultant–client relationship during the course of an assignment.

Our categorization and analysis of the data is based on using thematic analysis techniques drawn from the work of Boyatzis (1998), Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), and Miles and Huberman (1994). Our focus concentrates on the variables emerging between the consultants' testimonies and the inter-relationship between key concepts. Since the phenomena we are studying are personal testimonies recorded in text, the use of thematic codes helps group together ideas while questioning the relevance of the messages expressed.

We use thematic analysis not as a means of validating a predetermined hypothesis but rather to identify the significance of traces of trust in the available empirical findings. By examining the commonalities and differences between such themes, we examine the qualities of validity within the linguistic context of the interviewees' interpretations of experience (Silverman, 2000). The nature of the assignment and dynamics of the projects certainly differ, but there are distinct similarities in the broader managerial context of organizational needs and proposed advice. For example, two clients that may have worked with two different consulting firms on different projects are asked to reflect on the degree of personal trust in the individual consultant during the course of the assignment, while consultants working in different firms were asked to comment on characteristics of trust displayed by clients.

Below we present selected testimonies, focusing particularly on comments made about culture and trust. Although our presentation of findings is limited in terms of its representation of all the varied and nuanced experiences of the participants, the themes we discuss are representative across the participants' experiences. In this sense, we have selected the quotations that most clearly help capture the overarching thematic trend between inter-organizational and interpersonal culture and trust.

### **Cultural spheres – consultants and clients**

Our findings indicate that, in the context of inter-organizational trust, culture is exemplified through forms of power structures, identity symbols, and communicative procedures that become formalized and mutually shared between the two parties. The sharing of a corporate culture is not only about showing agreement with procedures, it is about sharing the deeper meaning and intentions attached to them (see Smircich, 1983; Dietz *et al.*, this volume).

We also find that the corporate culture here of the client most often seeks to dominate the partnership with the consultant. Consultants reflect the client's organizational aspirations by contributing to the thinking and emotions expressed between members. At times, it is debatable whether the consultants' 'code-switching' (see Molinsky, 2007) to the client's culture is genuine or superficial. Nevertheless it is perceived to be an important quality for how and why their service is optimized.

In addition, we find that the way in which consultants endeavour to align their corporate values with the client becomes an interpretative process that itself contains ambiguity and uncertainty. Often, consultants find themselves in a state of tension trying to reconcile the values attached to the parent consulting firm with their own personal values.

*Clients and inter-organizational trust*

The following interview excerpt is drawn from a director with much experience in using management consulting firms. The client is representative of a large firm and he refers to the nature of his working partnership with the consulting firm at a strategic level. The client firm's activities are closely linked to the motor vehicle industry. The client director illustrates how the close corporate ties with the consulting firm have been instrumental in recent years for the firm's ability to adapt to environmental change and to enhance employee performance.

Part of the client firm's long-term plan has been the unusual integration of the consulting firm into the board of directors. Interestingly, the representative consultant has been given an equal degree of authority and responsibility as other directors. The rationale behind this move has been the alignment of culture between the two firms. This development of inter-organizational trust does not aim at generating short-term solutions, but rather, an equal share of commitment and responsibility for the long term. This is well expressed in the following statement from the client:

[The consultant] has an equal influence in many respects to all the other directors. So I don't think that we're in the situation that he has any more undue influence than any of the other 7 directors. And if he's voted down he's voted down. But at least he is there and he can help to make sure that ABA and the contract are focused on helping, because, he fully understands what the business drivers are and what the strategies are to make sure that they've put in the right sort of support arrangements to make sure that we actually get to them. But it is a contradiction and it's a balance. It's trying to get those two things working in harmony.

But our partnership was about the sharing of information from both sides of the organization from ourselves and our supplier, and the integration of all parts of the organization, again, at different parts of the layer. So, that goes all the way up to the board, so you have things like open book accounting, there's honesty about business benefits, there's honesty about the costs which are coming up, where they come from. And we have links at all different levels of the organization to try to work in more of a partnership rather than a customer supplier. We're trying to move along things like joint estimating, so that ABA and our partners actually work together on estimating what the costs of a new proposal might come up to, rather than let our suppliers go away for three months or a month and come up with a figure and then I'm spending 6 to 8 weeks asking them well where do you get this from? Why do you think it's going to take you 1,000 days to do that? They're actually part of the process and to see the build up these figures to actually make the proposal evaluation a lot quicker and more effective. So it is about trust and it's about letting the suppliers in closer to us and then letting us in closer to them and that goes all the way up to the level of the board.

The underlying notion of the consultant's 'inclusion', while at the same time retaining his status of being 'external' to the firm, is particularly interesting. The identity of the consultant is placed in a context of *transition* between

being an ‘insider’ and yet at the same time remaining an ‘outsider’. It is through this ambiguity of the consultant’s status that the client party believes they will be able to maximize the added value from their relationship with the consulting firm. However, the consultant’s belonging to the parent consulting firm indicates a specific cultural sphere that is represented by the identity of the firm’s corporate objectives and the need to maintain the continuation of the consulting contract. The consultant becomes a representative of the parent firm’s desire to demonstrate an image of knowledge and expertise that will appeal to the client. The consultant is under pressure to uphold an image of service.

By having equal status of power and influence the consultant is being given an important sense of ‘ownership’. The consultant is expected to express an equally strong sense of concern and care for the business issues that matter to the directors. The consultant becomes part of the corporate cultural sphere of the client by being allowed to sit on the board of directors. However, the consultant does not share their years of experience in the firm, nor is he part of the everyday working environment. He does not share that part of their culture, but is nevertheless expected to subscribe to their values. The consultant is required to envisage and *enact* a sense of ownership where he is believed to share the burden and vision of what needs to be achieved.

The client firm assumes that the consultant’s contribution will not be driven by possible unwanted business motives influenced by the aspirations of the consulting firm to maintain the business contract or generate short-term revenues. The client firm believes that the consultant’s accountability to the firm becomes a lot more *transparent* by sharing an equal level of seniority and power. Such transparency is not simply produced at the interpersonal level, but also at the inter-organizational level, where the consultant is asked to reinforce the business mission of the client firm. The alignment or misalignment between the corporate cultural spheres is institutionalized in formal procedures that are mutually binding between the two parties. In addition to the above, the duration of the consultant’s involvement in the board aims at the accumulation of experience that is believed to mature over time. The client firm believes that it can get added value out of the consulting firm through the consultant’s depth of integration and experience. This is based on the assumption that the achieved maturity will further assist the making of decisions that do not simply seek to produce results for the short term.

The development of trust becomes possible out of the above sharing of cultural spheres because it contributes to nurturing the qualities of ‘ability’, ‘benevolence’ and ‘integrity’, all of which are necessary for the emergence of trustworthiness (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). The directors are able to detect the

consultants' ability to provide input to the board's decision making concerning the future direction and strategy of the firm. If the directors detect that the consultant does not show the competency to appreciate the issues that concern them they will dispute his ability to be a channel of new knowledge and information.

Second, the consultant's context of manifesting his input in the client takes place by indications of benevolence, as the consultant is perceived to act in the interests of the trustor. The duration of the consultant's involvement creates the 'space' for the directors to *verify* the consultant's motives and intentions. As a result, the consultant is able to legitimize his service for the client by demonstrating that he is acting in their best interests.

Finally, and as the second excerpt above indicates, the client firm is able to develop trust in the consultant because of the consultant and consulting firm's integrity to the client. The client discusses the consultant's integrity in the context of honesty and the quality of openness in the communication between the two parties. The client firm shows its commitment to trusting the consultant by allowing him to be part of its formal decision-making process. Such behaviour creates the need for an equal behaviour of reciprocation through which the consultant must demonstrate that he is able to live up to their expectations.

The client directors are well aware of the possible disadvantages of such a close partnership: namely that it prevents the client firm from having the scope of self-reflection and self-criticism. The long-term ties have clear organizational implications in the client in terms of not being exposed to alternative consulting suggestions as well as outside competition. Having entered into this partnership the client firm is 'compelled' to act on the consultants' recommendations. However, the internal decision making between members of the client firm aims to ensure that recommendations are well examined before being acted upon. There exists an inevitable degree of bias which can have disadvantages as the client firm does not have equal access to other consulting firms. This rather 'monopolized' type of partnership brings risk and uncertainty as to whether the consultants will endeavour to produce the best they can for the client. Despite the close and long-term relationship the client firm continues to make a strategic choice to trust that the consultants will continue to provide them with innovative insights. The client's sense of risk and uncertainty are clearly captured in the following statement:

Certainly within the client firm we have some get-out-clauses if we need to use them. But yeah I think that's a conscious decision that I think we made when we decided to go on this partnership approach. Yeah, you do have potentially more options available to you if you don't have a partnership if it's very much a customer-supplier

relationship, but then you have the downside to that relationship as well. You don't always get the buy in from your IT supplier about where you're going. You don't always expect your IT supplier to put a bit of skin into the game in terms of what we're trying to achieve. You miss out a little bit on some of the advice and guidance. But similarly you also don't get an idea of where that company is going and it's a difficult one.

Inter-organizational culture is institutionally embedded in the formalized authority and participation given to the consultant within the client board of directors. The frame of reference that governs this interaction is embedded in policies and procedures which might be expressed through explicit formalized statements of agreement. These are used to ensure transparency and open transfer of information. Organizational culture is situated within statements of agreement which also have consequences for the rest of the client member's practises at an operational level. It is the mutually shared *intention* and desire for a strategic partnership, at the corporate level, that creates meaning for the policies and procedures which in turns help sustain the corporate culture. We argue that the *co-created* culture from which organizational trust is manifested acts as a kind of information and experience resource. Risk and uncertainty are being 'managed' because of an implicitly achieved equilibrium of the positive expectations situated within the dimensions of organizational culture.

### *Consultants and inter-organizational trust*

The relationship between inter-organizational trust and culture is also evident from the consultants' testimonies and from working with clients. We argued earlier that the consultant's process of entering into the client's culture and creating legitimation for their services requires them to be competent in: a) appreciating the business problem and how the client sees it, b) designing a consulting service that can address the problem while at the same time generating targeted revenues for the parent consulting firm, and c) addressing any interpersonal issues between the organizational actors and the emergence of conflict during the delivery of the business assignment. There is mutual endeavour to develop common grounds of understanding, so that consultants are able to communicate and deliver their service according to the client's specific requirements.

The key theme that emerges out of the following analysis is the consultants' way of seeking to manage their personal and corporate cultural spheres/tiles. Consultants often have to modify their behaviour so that they can appear to 'fit' the culture of the client, despite the fact that they may not themselves

represent the values that they seek to project. Consultants experience tension in having to accommodate the requirements of the parent consulting firm in relation to their own *and* those of the client. Such tension brings to the fore a clearer depiction of the coexisting and co-conflicting 'tiles' that consultants try to align, successfully or unsuccessfully.

In an interview with a management consultant who has extensive experience in the industry reference is made to his time of working with Arthur Andersen before its demise. The consultant held a high managerial position in the firm as a UK director. In discussing his experience the consultant argues that the corporate culture influenced how the consultants realized their role and objectives in relation to the client. In particular, the creation of corporate revenue targets and performance-related structures had implications for the consultant's engagement with the clients. Consultants were encouraged by the parent firm to find ways of promoting the impression that the consulting services would be competent to address the clients' organizational needs:

People very often are pulled in to working with those firms when they do have a calling, but the problem is when you're in that environment it's a very subtle process over which over time, and I was in the 'A' firm and 'B' firm for 18 years, and, over that period of time there's a process of osmosis where certain corporate values get taken on board. You don't realize they're not your values, you've taken them in from your environment and for me it was only, in 2001 I got out of that environment. It was not probably until 2003/2004 before I really could say 'Wow, I don't have to do that, I can be me and I can do this.' Very difficult to do that in a big consulting firm because you're expected to follow a particular trajectory, your career progress is very clear, there's up or out.

The corporate values that consultants needed to communicate to the client firm represent one cultural sphere. The particular consultant's personal agreement or disagreement with the consulting behaviour represents a second cultural sphere. The client's identity and specific organizational problems against which the consultants seek to communicate their advice represent a third cultural sphere. Creating trust with clients arises from the way consultants are able to show that their corporate cultural sphere is in alignment with the client's corporate cultural sphere. The fact that consultants might not genuinely believe that such an alignment is possible, brings to the fore Molinsky's (2007) argument of 'code-switching', where the consultants modify their behaviour so that it *appears* to be in alignment with the client. According to the quotation above the ethical consideration by the consultants created unrest at the time of selling a service because the consultant knew the advice was 'disguised' with promises that could not be delivered. The ability of the consultants to 'switch' their behaviour does not itself assure the

creation of a mutually shared ground of agreement. The personal cultural tile, represented in the consultant's moral assumptions, education or personal philosophy, became the principal factor by which the consultant sought to develop his own consulting firm over the years. Also, it became the reason he wanted to change the whole of his approach to working with clients.

The clash between the consultant's own beliefs systems and the parent consulting firm becomes even more apparent in the context of the financial targets consultants needed to achieve. The profit-seeking strategy of the firm was designed around performance measurement and career progression. According to the interviewee, the opportunity to achieve a promotion was partly dependent on the targets they achieved over the year. The parent firm seemed to require consultants to win the contract or deliver a business assignment successfully *without* appreciating how such corporate pressure might affect its people at an operational level. As a result, even though consultants might want to achieve the fulfilment of specific performance targets they might still find themselves unable to go against their personal ethical values.

It can be argued that the clients did not realize how and why the consultants managed to deliver a set of additional but unnecessary services in order to meet their own business revenue targets. It is certainly possible for consultants to develop trusting relationships with clients whether or not they exploit the relationship. The client's perceived trust in the consultant might not be dependent on the corporate targets set by the parent consulting firm. However, we argue that the client's possible perception of the consultants as exploiting a business opportunity may have a detrimental effect on whether a business proposal is viewed as credible. Clients may accept or reject the consultants' knowledge service because of the perceived fear of manipulation. Such perceived fear or uncertainty needs to be seen separately from the fact-based credibility of the information/knowledge proposed by the consultants. The consultants feel the need to project a positive image to the client so that they can win the client's trust. However, as the quotation below indicates, the consultant's personal frustration about how this might be possible does not seem to be appreciated by the parent consulting firm:

Yeah, I think there, there was a very strong feeling that if you went to a client meeting and you didn't come away with either an order then you'd sort of, failed. Whereas the people that I work with now, and the work that I do now, is very much a case of you develop relationships.

The interviewee succinctly expresses the essence of corporate culture by making reference to the firm's internal climate. The failure to produce a business order after a client meeting was not explicitly associated with poor performance yet consultants had internalized an association of such failure



with poor performance. Furthermore, corporate culture also shaped the consultants' perceptions about their own performance and that of their colleagues. It is possible that the consultants' successes or failure to win a client assignment had broader implication for the power relationship between colleagues.

Even though the above statement can be interpreted as a personal internal struggle that is not representative of other consultants and which might not affect other consultants' trusting relationship with clients, it is clear that the corporate cultural sphere has a strong influence on how individuals perform at an operational level. The point of tension is not just the self-consciousness of the particular consultant, it is rather the wider struggle for the consultants to reconcile their corporate culture with their own and the expectations of the client. The phrases used by the consultant to describe his experience support our argument that the alignment of inter-organizational trust is dependent on the alignment of culture between parties. The consultant argues for 'a process of osmosis' where corporate values are internalized often without the actors being consciously aware of it. The corporate culture creates a powerful social setting where actors create meaning relations about their identity and role dealing with clients.

The exercise of corporate culture as represented in the form of power structures, corporate identity and communicative procedures makes up the cultural spheres between the consultant and client firm. The alignment or misalignment of culture is about the mutual sharing of the meaning attached to the above artifacts. The information produced from the cultural factors, we argue, plays an important role for managing the features of uncertainty and risk. For example, we have seen that clients are able to trust the consulting firm because of the commitment that the firm has made to contribute to the decision making of the board of directors. When the consultant shares an equal degree of power, authority and responsibility with the client, positive client expectations are created which also foster corporate trust. The above argument has clear implications for how and why *distrust* might develop in the relationship between consultants and clients, especially at the inter-organizational level. Clients seek to detect information about consultants which can inform their decision to allow themselves to become vulnerable.

### Interpersonal levels of trust

In the previous section we discussed the manifestation of inter-organizational trust in the context of the consultants' and clients' experience. We argued that trust may be understood from the alignment/misalignment of culture

underpinning the structure of the consultant–client partnership. In this section, we turn to trust at the interpersonal level. From the trust literature we find that interpersonal trust is dependent on the personal attributes of the organizational actors (Whitener *et al.*, 1998; Sheppard and Sherman, 1998). This is in contrast to organizational trust which is situated in managerial frameworks of interaction that are mutually accepted prior to the business engagement (Gambetta, 1988).

### *Clients and interpersonal trust*

In an interview with a senior client from the public sector, reference is made to his experience of interaction with a particular consultant on a project. The project was part of a consortium between different local authorities in the North East of England. One of the challenges for this combined collaboration was the level of partnership and agreement. The client talks about the early stages of the project where initial drafts were made about the corporate objectives and the degree of commitment each party should show. In the following statement the client refers to the consultant's effort to create a sense of collectivism between the client members by discussing their support of local football teams, and to distract his client audience from the fact that he came from the polar opposite of the country, in regional culture terms. Football might have been felt to be irrelevant to the business topic but it clearly made an impression on the interviewee and also on the project:

A young chap – talking about relationships and about personalities – a young guy from Surrey, educated in Surrey, a very much South of England born and bred, first thing he did when he came into the town where he was doing this particular project, was learn who supported which football teams. And he found out who the Sunderland supporters were and he found out who the Newcastle supporters were [two bitter local rivals], and he got some information and some local information about the place, and talked about that. And I remember seeing him at the first meeting, and you can argue about whether he meant it or it was just his job, but his first 15 minutes of his presentation was talking about local themes, and it was a very much, a sort of, 'How does he know that? Maybe he's not so bad for a Surrey lad', so there was a sort of, not an acceptance, but there was a recognition that he was trying to involve . . . Rather than coming in and saying 'I'm the consultant, I know about these things, now you listen to what I've got to tell you'; [it's] how you manage the process, how you manage the relationship.

In the above excerpt we note a number of different cultural spheres/tiles that helped reduce the level of uncertainty in the client. The consultancy firm and its approach to tackling the organizational issue represent one cultural sphere. The client firm and its belonging to the public sector with its sensitive

internal political issues represent a second cultural sphere. The use of sport and the football teams represents a further cultural sphere. It is important to note that it is not only the number of cultural spheres that might exist in the partnership that is important but how they are used in order to build trust in the relationship. The use of a shared cultural sphere specific to the client helped to reinforce the impression that the consultant was capable of delivering in the project. Reference to football teams became a metaphor through which the consultant tried to trace some common ground of interest between the actors. It is clear that this did not just happen on the day of the meeting. The consultant went through the process of identifying the Sunderland and Newcastle supporters and the geography of the region. The social context from which the client members could identify common grounds of interest helped reduce the actors' perceived uncertainty about the project itself. Identifying a common ground of interest within *sport* (itself a unique cultural sphere, especially in the North East of England) became a point of information where the client members could demonstrate that they were able to share some form of agreement elsewhere, especially if organizational adversaries supported the same team outside of work. The above practise sent a clear message to the participants that the consultant was an individual who had the competency to facilitate a discussion, while showing a personal sense of interest towards the members themselves (benevolence). The members' association with football teams clearly signifies a sense of identity which the consultant also used to associate himself with the business project. In the above context, it can be argued that the existence of a shared identity concerning football created a disposition of trust towards the consultant who was seen as able to facilitate the discussion and accommodate their differences. Put differently, the cultural tile of sport came to dominate over the members' corporate consultant and client tiles and differences.

Even though the consultant's interest or commitment shown in the above approach might be regarded as superficial, temporary and irrelevant, it influenced the participants' perceptions of the consultant. The interpersonal trust was not based on the qualities of the managerial framework itself but on the interpersonal common grounds of interest. Certainly, we cannot assume that the client members' potential agreement about the project was merely dependent on their association with the football teams. However, it can be argued that the consultant had taken the time and trouble to find out about the client members and managed to create a climate or disposition to trust out of a relaxed atmosphere of *familiarity*. As argued by Dietz *et al.* (this volume), trust is gradually developed out of 'cues' individuals construct about each other. Even though the use of sport might seem a minor metaphor, it

nevertheless helped create a sense of collectivism and this is the characteristic we seek to underline.

A further factor that created positive impressions in the client was the fact that the consultant showed the ability to manage a non-familiar social setting while having knowledge of the differences of interests between its members. The consultant showed a sense of benevolence by seeking to engage with the different groups even though this was perceived to be outside his own comfort zone. Thirdly, from the interview it may be said that the consultant demonstrated a sense of integrity by attempting to find new ways of engaging and communicating his ideas with particular members of the client party despite the fact that they exercised resistance and criticism over his propositions. The consultant went to some lengths to appreciate the different reasons why the client members disagreed with him, without exercising judgment against the clients or bypassing their implicit and explicit concerns.

The progress of the meeting and the success or failure of the project outside this area of agreement can only be subject to speculation. We do not seek to make conclusive statements about the broader implications of the achieved alignment of interpersonal culture. However, we can see from the client's reaction that the consultant's efforts made an impression. Interestingly, this became a tactic for the specific interviewee in a separate project where his team needed to make a presentation to a different public sector audience.

### *Consultants and interpersonal trust*

Consultants also place an equal degree of emphasis on their interpersonal qualities of trust with clients. Consultants argue that the personal cultural elements are situated around qualities of communication, expression of emotions, and the process of making sense of the other party's expectations. In discussing the different reasons that might jeopardize the development of a client assignment, the consultant quoted below points to the interpersonal interaction of relationships at a subjective level. That is, the consultants' style of delivery might not be appropriate or desirable for the client. The consultant also mentions the dimension of timing, pace and misalignment of personal expectations that have to do with the client's understanding of the consultant's intentions.

I think that there are several. One is that you have a *mismatch* between the people that you have put on the project from the consulting company, and, their style in the client's environment. You may send someone that's quite aggressive and they're looking at a job in a client organization that has a very soft or passive culture. He/she will then have problems with the client's people. So that may go wrong. Another one is where you

may try to recommend to change things too quickly. You've got to be able to choose the pace of the client. The third one which I keep mentioning is when you go in and the consultancy firm, whoever they are, ignore the recommendations made by the other parts of the organization. That's the reason why most of the [consulting interventions] go wrong.

The above statement encapsulates the interpersonal cultural spheres as residing within individuals who might not be aware of them until they are in some kind of conflict with the partners. The consultant's style of delivery of an assignment is subjectively ingrained in his/her personality, judgment and also sensitivity to accommodating other ideas before defending a point of view. This represents one cultural sphere that is outside the corporate cultural sphere of the parent firm. Furthermore, such a behavioural approach is not made mutually explicit until the point of the interaction with the client party. In this sense, the pace at which the client expects the consultant to make decisions or negotiate a point of view cannot be known *a priori*. The consultant's attempt to comply with the client's culture has to do with a state of transition between how they want to deliver a business assignment in contrast to how the client envisages it being satisfied. This is clearly an implicitly subjective process of sensemaking (see Weick, 1993). The client's corporate culture may signal a clear sense of direction to which the consultant needs to adapt. However, the client's manifestation of a personal cultural fabric is not necessarily represented by the corporate culture. As a result, the consultants enter into an arena of interaction where they have to build trust on the grounds of shared personal behavioural traits.

The process of 'thinking alike' or displaying a 'consulting style' that is in harmony with the client's expectations helps reduce the degree of uncertainty and risk in the relationship. This is because the signalled information helps actors manage the other party's anticipations, thereby reducing uncertainty. However, the creation of such a working relationship 'match' can be explained through the emergence of the personal cultural tiles that *happen* to be alike at the time of the interaction. Since the consultant is not in a position to know in advance what style might fit the client's culture he/she is trying to develop cues from which to adapt his/her behaviour. From the above it follows that consultants can find themselves in a state of a mutual working relationship 'match' with the client, because of their similar personal cultural spheres. At the same time, such personal cultural spheres might be very different. As a result, the consultant might need to make an effort to understand the consulting style they need to develop in order to be aligned with the expectations of the client: to 'code-switch', in other words (Molinsky, 2007).

From the analysis it is also clear that the behavioural qualities of benevolence and integrity are crucial for the building of trust. This is because they help create a safe and credible moral ground of communication in which the vulnerability of each party can be manifested without criticism or manipulation (Dietz *et al.*, this volume). This theme is illustrated in an interview with a senior management consultant who discusses aspects of her communication with the client and the reasons for building trust. The consultant is the HR manager for one of the four large consulting and accounting firms with extensive experience in the industry. In asking about the dynamics of a successful client project she makes reference to the context of her interpersonal interaction with the client: in particular, the importance of openness and quality of communication from which both parties can challenge each other, and freely express their views and emotions. For the interviewee the lack of hesitancy in being able to become vulnerable to each other without fear of being misunderstood is a critical factor in the success of the project. From the following statements there is clear acknowledgement that if the client does not make their views clear to the consultant, and the consultant does not take action to rectify a position, there is a high possibility of distrust endangering the continuation of the contract. According to the interviewee, the mutual constant feedback should not take place only at the time of disagreement, but should also become a constant feature of the relationship. By not hesitating to become vulnerable to each other, both parties manage to reduce perceptions of risk and uncertainty, which helps strengthen the degree of trust. What the client thinks is often misunderstood or not known by the consultants. Assumptions are made that can lead to undesirable actions.

There'll be things I do that people love, and things that I do they think, 'oh God, I wish she didn't do that'. And you have to basically provide them with a forum to air those views. And once they air those views you have to commit to action, the ones you feel you can action, and change. Because one approach doesn't work for all. Now you'll have asked some of the questions along the time, maybe you didn't ask them in a way that they realized you were asking the question and at that point it challenges how do you turn it around and you can only get that from what they say, start feedback at that point and it might be: I hate the consultant, I can't work with her because I don't think she listens to me. Or it could be, she doesn't understand my business and then you would draw on the team. OK, I'll put somebody else in there.

Which is why I said to you, you know, when things go wrong and when things go well, why you have to get constant feedback from the client to make sure that you're all on the same track to ensure that the partnership works.

Now if you do that on a regular basis, you tend to either be able to mould the team, or, change the team, or, recognize it before it becomes an issue. But, as we both know, sometimes you don't get that feedback on the regular basis you should. Because you're in the project, you've got time restraints, you're running along, and then you know,

they scream at the eleventh hour because: 'aagh, this isn't what I wanted, this isn't what I meant'.

The qualities of interpersonal interaction as confined within the transparency of communication and trust to air one's views without fear of being misunderstood needs to be part of the culture of the partnership. Although corporate values might not promote mutual openness in the manner expressed by the above interviewee, the success of a trusting relationship is situated in the way that such interpersonal dynamics are managed. Hence, these interpersonal cultural spheres that can promote qualities of integrity and benevolence become important building blocks for achieving trust.

The consultant's willingness to be challenged by the client is related to the personal cultural perception of the consultant as the 'knowledge provider' or expert. The consultant's personal culture is exemplified through the implicitly upheld notions of status and identity which also carry an inherent sense of credibility or correctness. The process of admitting that a suggested course of advice has not achieved the expected outcome is not only expensive for the client but also damaging for the consultant's reputation. However, the interpersonal nature of this relationship means that it is possible through mutual endeavour to create a culture of mutual vulnerability. Such vulnerability is possible when consultants and clients are able to express constructive criticism for each other's position.

What the clients and consultants really think of each other often remains hidden in the course of the interaction. However, the accumulation of feelings of resentment is likely to threaten the relationship unless they are made explicit and dealt with. According to the literature, trust becomes possible because of the positive expectations that one party is willing to uphold for the other (McKnight *et al.*, 1998). Creating an interpersonal culture in which actors are not hesitant to listen and adjust their positions against the criticism of the other party helps reinforce the accounts of positive expectations (Sheppard and Sherman, 1998). This is because both parties have a better mutual awareness about the motives, interests and way of thinking of the other party, with the result that it allows them to sense possible misalignments and avoid misinterpretations. Such behavioural cultural spheres promote the presence of integrity and benevolence in the relationship that in turn helps to foster the emergence of trustworthiness.

A strong theme that is reiterated in the interview, and which helps further support the above argument, centres on the term 'trusted advisor' (Maister *et al.*, 2002). The consultant argues that the point of becoming a trusted advisor to the client means that the interaction does not reside in the operational framework of the business assignment only. The trusted advisor is the

individual against whom the client members are able to allow themselves to be vulnerable, that is, without feeling fear of being exploited by the consultants.

The process of becoming a trusted advisor does not seem to depend on a mere number of practises or ‘unique’ personal characteristics. To be a trusted advisor implies a state of communicative condition where the consultant has established clear interpersonal links that allow criticism and dialogue. To what extent such an objective can be achieved by the firm’s consultants is not clear from the interview. Clearly, to become a trusted advisor is not dependent solely on the consulting party but also on the client. We do not conclude that an interpersonal trusting relationship can be achieved merely because of the consultants. What is clear, however, according to the HR manager, is that in the process of building mutual trust, the attention needs to shift from what the parent consulting firm represents at a corporate level, to the *individual* consultant on the project, and his/her relationship with the client:

When something goes wrong on one of your projects, I mean it goes wrong on the project, it may cost your client money and it will cost you money because you probably won’t bill for it in quite the same way. But if you are really that trusted advisor and in that partnership there is also self esteem that thinks: ‘oh God, I did that so wrong’. And you beat yourself up, and you learn your lessons, and, if you are a true trusted advisor, you walk up to them and you say: ‘you know, we got that wrong’. I’ve sat back and I’ve thought about it and I’ve beaten myself up about it and actually you know when I think about it on reflection, we should have done this that and the other. Tell me your way forward and we’ll tell you ours. And often then you get quite a lot of synergy.

One of the functions the trusted advisor fulfils is by becoming more than just a conduit of information. The client’s trust in the consultant provides an important social context of legitimation that has clear implications for why business advice might be accepted or rejected. In this sense, the client is able to accept a set of consulting recommendations without having clear knowledge of the outcome or implications of their implementation. Trust in the consultant provides a point of reference of meaning and experience that can be thought of as somehow conditioning the client’s existing perceived uncertainty/risk. An interpersonal dynamic of trust is dependent on the underpinning assumptions and values of what makes the successful cooperation possible. Here the issue of perceived identity and exchange of power are dimensions that can influence how the individuals interpret their personal interaction with others. The above interviewee alludes to the consultant’s willingness to admit that they do not have the answers or that they make mistakes.




To some extent, the consulting role has been idealized with features of 'accuracy', or 'solutions', creating an image of 'expertise' that is used to justify the charging of high fees (Clark, 1995; Fincham, 1999; Sturdy, 1997). In this context, the interviewee argues that such an image does not reflect the reality of a business assignment, and the effort to idealize such an image can produce a negative effect because by being reluctant to acknowledge mistakes or the limitations of their knowledge consultants may lose the client's trust, thereby jeopardizing the business relationship. According to the above reasoning, clients are keen on developing an interpersonal trusting relationship when consultants allow themselves to become vulnerable to the client.

This idea might seem contradictory to the image of expertise often projected by the parent consulting firms. Consultants seem to move into a state of transience between a) representing the corporate culture and identity of the firm, while at the same time, b) being able to respond to the client's specific expectations/needs. As we have seen, the psychodynamics of interpersonal trust are not just based on information and knowledge but also emerge from ability, integrity and benevolence (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). In our view, this is why the consultant supports 'constant feedback', so that she can know how the other person views and feels about the project.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to examine how inter-organizational and interpersonal trust is produced, maintained or threatened between management consultants and clients. We examined trust through the lens of multiple cultural 'spheres', or 'tiles'. The alignment or misalignment of cultural spheres can help foster or hinder the development of inter-organizational or interpersonal trust because trust is developed from the way risk and uncertainty are managed in the consultant–client relationship.

At the inter-organizational level we argue that culture is demonstrated through the types of formal structures and strategic action plans with which consultants manage their intervention in the client firm. An alignment of culture is about sharing areas of agreement about how the service needs to be deployed. This is represented in formal decision making  reporting but also in informal discussions. We find that consultants find themselves in a state of flux between: a) having to uphold the culture of the parent firm, while at the same time, b) having to meet the different client needs and c) their own values. Deviating from the culture and corporate values of the parent firm can cause the consultant some degree of internal struggle when they are expected to meet expectations in a way that goes against their personal values.

Consultants can lose the clients' trust when they are not perceived to be committed to fulfilling the clients' interests. We argue that the corporate cultural sphere provides an important source of knowledge from which both parties draw information and experience about the other party in order to manage their sense of risk and uncertainty in the relationship.

At the interpersonal level, we argue that trust is managed through traits of culture as represented in behavioural qualities that match the client's anticipation/emotions. In contrast to inter-organizational trust, which can be seen as calculative and rational, personal trust is dependent on the features of ability, benevolence and integrity (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). The consultant's commitment to be caring towards the client is not necessarily confined within the boundaries of the business assignment. However, the consultant's frequent unwillingness to compromise the connection with clients can indicate a personal sense of commitment into the relationship.

Our study raises questions about the degree to which consultants and clients create some form of hybrid culture that is similar to or distinct from their corporate or personal cultural spheres. On the one hand it is clear that consultants and clients are both restricted by their corporate and personal cultural spheres in terms of making decisions that contradict the values represented in them. On the other hand, our study also indicates how both parties often seek to develop accounts of shared meaning and agreement by stretching the interpretation of what their corporate and personal values stand for. For example, consultants realize that manipulating a client's understanding in order to sell more consulting work could jeopardize the business relationship. Hence, the individual's role and influence in shaping the dynamic of an assignment may be driven by corporate objectives but also by personal values that often can be in tension with each other. It is difficult to argue in what way a hybrid culture is generated between the two parties because of the complex structure and fluidity with which values, aspirations and corporate demands are simulated and channelled within the consultant–client interaction for sustaining the business relationship.

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